

The Worth of a Worthy Cause:

Reflections on Leadership of a Student Activist Organization

An Honors Thesis (HONR499)

by

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to evaluate my personal experiences as a leader of a campus activist organization. I shared several narratives to represent common themes of my leadership experience that have caused frustration, encouragement, and a range of other emotions. Through examination of research relevant to my experiences, I have more comprehensively reflected upon my leadership role throughout my college career by comparing and contrasting it to published literature. The research included in this reflection incorporates topics related to my leadership experience including the role of failure, mental health, perspectives and paradigms on leadership, expectations surrounding activism, beliefs promoting student involvement, and the influence of personality traits on leadership. The prevailing question of this discourse and my own thoughts is, "has this been worth it?" Through recounting aspects of being a leader and comparing this to research, I have a heightened understanding of my own leadership experiences. Evaluating my experiences through the lens of research has allowed me to recognize the value and effectiveness of my leadership efforts.

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Freshman Year

My leadership role in an activist organization at my university has stemmed from my awareness of the human rights violation known as human trafficking. I first learned about human trafficking in high school as my sister became increasingly aware, and enraged, by the realities of modern-day slavery. In my ignorance, I did not understand for a while what the issue was or why she cared. When I was seventeen, she went on a mission trip to Greece where she interacted with girls and women who were being sex trafficked. Because of her desire to help combat this crime, I began to research human trafficking on my own by my freshman year of college.

I did not know of any organizations on campus addressing this issue and thought about beginning one to raise awareness. Soon after, I learned of two people – who happened to live in the same residence hall as I did – who had already begun the process of starting a campus organization to address the issue of modern-day slavery. For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to this organization as Student Activist Organization (SAO). I sought out the student who was president of this not-yet-established organization to express my interest, and - I informed him that, despite all my other responsibilities, I would be fully committed to his organization. In retrospect, I was completely unaware of the depth of commitment I was pledging. The organization's first meeting was held at the beginning of my second semester of college. I attended this meeting, along with every other subsequent SAO meeting and event, throughout my college career.

Human trafficking has grown to be the second largest criminal industry globally, with an estimated annual profit of 44 billion dollars (Belser, 2005). It is viewed as modern-day slavery and is defined by the U.S. government as, “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery” (National Institute of Justice, 2012). There are more people in slavery today than any other point in human history. Due to the hidden nature of human trafficking, prevalence and numbers of victims are not easily calculated. The International Labor Organization (2015) conservatively estimates there to be 20.9 million victims globally. Throughout most of my college career, the commonly used estimate was 27 million but in 2014, the Global Slavery Index estimated there to be 35.8 million victims of modern-day slavery (Global Slavery Index, 2014). Human trafficking can be separated into the two broad categories of *forced labor* and *sex trafficking*, and it encompasses a variety of areas, including: prostitution, pornography, exotic dancing, domestic servitude, commercial sexual exploitation, servile marriage, and forced labor in agriculture, construction, domestic work, and manufacturing (Potocky, 2010 & Polaris, 2015).

Throughout my leadership with SAO, I have emphasized the reality that human trafficking is not only a travesty that occurs far away in developing countries but is also overwhelmingly present in the United States as well. An estimated 17,500 people are trafficked into the United States from other countries, although some estimates place this to be as high as 60,000 individuals per year (Chisolm-Straker, n.d.). These estimates are not considering the amount of people who are born in the United States

and trafficked within the country. Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST) refers to individuals under the age of 18 who do not cross any national borders but are sex trafficked within the United States. Conservative estimates state that there are at least 100,000 children who currently fit in the demographic of DMST victims and at least 325,000 children considered at-risk of becoming victims. DMST victims undergo physical abuse, rape, drug addiction, isolation, arrests, inadequate medical care, and severe psychological and emotional trauma (Kotrla, 2010).

The gravity and complexity of human trafficking has become increasingly real to me through research and experiences over the years. Through attending conferences, reading books, researching and writing on the topic, interacting with survivors, and leading SAO, I have realized how little I still know and how pervasive and seemingly permanent the problem is. DMST has been a form of human trafficking that has become of particular interest to me, compelling me to intern last summer at a group home for victims of DMST. As I have glimpsed the reality of human trafficking, I have been all the more inclined to use SAO as an avenue to educate people on the various societal factors that contribute to the existence of slavery. I hope to have promoted a nuanced understanding free from false absolutism or an immature and uninformed passion.

Sophomore Year

The Value of Failure

One particular semester of my sophomore year is defined in my memory by perpetually burnt fingertips, monotonous manual work, makeshift assembly lines, and -

of course- no pay. This was one aspect of the effort that went into planning the Speaker Event for SAO. With the goal of making money and providing a symbol for the cause, I decided to sell handmade bracelets and keychains at the event, and these were handmade by a collection of fellow students, my mother, and me. Even the process of designing and purchasing supplies to make these bracelets required extraordinary amounts of time and effort. Over Christmas break, my family tirelessly helped me determine how to design products that had symbolism and would be inexpensive to make without looking cheap.

I spent seemingly endless hours at college knotting and braiding the green, black, and white cords, interweaving a tiny metal handcuff. To connect the three strands of cord in each bracelet, I used a lighter to melt the ends and then had to squeeze the burnt ends together before they cooled to solidify them. This process led to calloused fingertips that often had flecks of melted wax stuck to them. I sat hunched on the floor of a specific kitchenette, repeating the process of production, often with a fellow laborer helping me for a time. With my cramped neck and evident exhaustion, lighters and scissors, and piles of products at different stages of completion, jokes were often made about the slave labor occurring for an anti-slavery cause.

The word “sophomore” translates to “wise fool” and that seems to accurately define what I was: an over ambitious college sophomore with dreams of changing the world. This ambition was evidenced through my tireless involvement in SAO and in planning the Speaker Event. The previous year, SAO had held an event featuring a speaker and I had goals to make this event bigger and better than it had previously been. One of the main components of my vision was to foster a sense of unity within

this event. The two largest Christian organizations on campus both meet on the same evening for their large-group meetings and I wanted both of these organizations to replace their own meeting with SAO's Speaker Event. In my ambitious foolishness, I expected this to be a simple process. The umbrella organization of SAO is a faith-based organization, leading the work of addressing and combating human trafficking globally. In my mind, campus Christian organizations would be willing and excited to join us in our efforts to motivate Christian students to fight injustice. Although I received prompt support from one of the organizations, I did not even receive an email response from the leader of the other organization for over a month. Regardless, I continued to move forward with planning the Speaker Event in, what felt like, a perpetual state of uncertainty.

The lack of cooperation from this Christian organization was only one of a myriad of setbacks I faced in planning the event. At one point during the planning process, I wrote in my journal, "There is so much anxiety building inside me. About everything in life... but especially this SAO event. I am ready to curl up and sleep to avoid thinking about it. I am so behind. I feel so inadequate. I don't know how I'm going to pull this off." Finding a venue and a speaker that were available on the same evening proved to be absurdly difficult. Multiple times, I solidified a venue reservation on campus to discover later that I had to cancel it. Our plan was to bring in a speaker from SAO's international headquarters and, although the Vice President took over this task for me, it also brought many frustrations. After being informed of yet another significant setback in finding a speaker and venue, I remember sitting in my dorm room alone and sobbing. This newest difficulty seemed impossible to overcome and I did not believe I

could muster the motivation or resilience to continue caring. The months of effort seemed in vain. The vice president of SAO came to my room that evening as soon as I informed her of the bad news. I had managed to stop crying but could not reciprocate any of her positivity or determination. As she weighed options and declared “We will make this work!” statements, I merely sat and stared. I could not voice my deep discouragement or increasing apathy.

The actual event is somewhat of an emotionless occurrence in my memory. Early in the morning the day before the Speaker Event, the Christian organization who had agreed to partner with us complained because they thought it would be “their” event. This presented a stressful, albeit laughably absurd, situation that had to be quickly handled. I remember being terrified that no one would come to the event, but then people began arriving. There were technical difficulties that others were working on – and I hated that it was completely out of my control. The speaker had flown in from Washington D.C. successfully and was impressed with our organization. A band played Christian music, and I remember disliking it and wishing their set was shorter. The speaker spoke – it was fine. Cardboard signs with statistics and quotes kept falling from the pillars they were attached to and made a loud noise each time they fell. I watched with dread as I saw signs loosening, awaiting their noisy fall. I was so warm - burning and sweating. I felt my throat clogging with raspy pain and could barely speak by the end of the night. My body was crashing. I had not slept at all for at least two days and with my long-winded adrenaline rush ending, all the weeks of stress were taking their toll. Afterwards, my parents wanted updates but I did not know what to say and avoided their questions. My home church in Pennsylvania had donated

a lot of money to help me put on this event and I felt like I had wasted it. Although I did not understand specifically why, I felt perpetually embarrassed.

Those bracelets and keychains and the countless hours spent making them, in a way, was the symbol of both my naiveté and my failure. My over-inflated expectations for the Speaker Event were embodied in the huge surplus of these products I had left after the event. I imagined several hundreds of people would attend the event and that every attendee would purchase a bracelet or keychain. In my mind, they would be so moved by the reality of human trafficking that spending five dollars to support the cause to end this travesty was a given. I was wrong. Over the following semesters, seeing this stock of bracelets and keychains in my possession has consistently made me feel queasy. I have given them away for free at various events because I only care to be rid of them. I now keep them in the trunk of my car so that they are out of sight and out of mind. Those bracelets and keychains remind me of the vast disparity between my goals and what I achieved in reality. I realize now that maybe my goals were more hopes rooted in passion rather than goals set in actuality. I was a sophomore, a “wise fool” with more foolishness than wisdom.

Failure is typically feared, stigmatized, and avoided. People do not desire their efforts to fail and the fear of failure can be so strong that it leads to a failure to even try. Yet the value of failure is notable and should not be overlooked. The value of failure is defined as “the value of reaching for something far beyond ourselves and how, even if we falter, it stretches us beyond our prior dimensions and emboldens us for the inevitable challenges ahead.”(Gergenn & Vanourek, 2008, par. 8). Henry Petroski has researched the role failure holds predominantly in the fields of engineering and design

and believes the view of failure being “all bad” is a misperception (2014, par. 1). Failure makes weaknesses evident, and it teaches and strengthens in ways that success cannot, whereas overconfidence can lead to carelessness and lack of humility (Petroski, 2014). Failure provides lessons to be learned and an opportunity for resilience. Anecdotally, “the best entrepreneurs are those who have failed at least once, because they’ve learned what doesn’t work as well as what does” (James, 2013, par. 11). Especially in regards to leadership, learning to positively deal with what the world calls failure has the potential to greatly impact one’s future endeavours.

Although the Speaker Event was in no way considered a failure by others - whether a member of SAO or a just attendee of the event - in my own perceptions, I had failed. The Speaker Event occurred soon before I took an official leadership role in SAO. My experiences with this event created a realistic foundation for my leadership and, as expressed in the definition of the value of failure, emboldened me for the inevitable challenges ahead. In retrospect, I can evaluate my reactions to everything that occurred with this event with far more ease and objectivity. Since then, I have had to handle many situations within SAO that have been far more trying than this. I believe this experience was vital because it forced me to persevere, caused me to recognize my support systems, tore down unrealistic expectations, and made me fully aware of the difficulty of leadership and activism.

Beliefs Influencing Student Engagement

As is expected, members of an activist organization desire to feel that their involvement is worthwhile and that they are contributing to the cause. I attempt to make

the organization an avenue for people to cultivate ideas and skills and develop into activists and leaders, but executing this goal seems overwhelmingly difficult and elusive. I attempt to be aware and understanding of the opinions, feelings, and needs of our members. At times, some members have expressed that they do not feel they had opportunities to become involved. Members of the executive board have also expressed similar sentiments, feeling that there were no responsibilities for them to fulfill.

In my sophomore year, before I was on the executive board, I remember feeling dumbfounded by the complaint of an executive member. She stated that there had been nothing for her to do, even while in the midst of consecutive large-scale events. She had seen the extreme load of stress and responsibilities the vice president and I were carrying, and felt there was nothing left for her to do. I did not understand how she could be unaware of the plethora of unmet needs I saw. I was frustrated that I was sacrificing so much time, sleep, and effort while a designated leader of SAO idly observed, wishing for involvement. Retrospectively, she expressed wishing she had involvement and tasks, which we did not want to be carrying alone. As I wondered if I had wrongly imposed myself, I realized that – whether or not I had stepped up – this executive member would likely not have taken initiative to contribute. Where I acted on unaddressed needs and potential areas of growth, she either did not notice them or desired to receive precise directives that would never be given.

In a research study on college students' perceptions of leadership, different sets of beliefs were found between student leaders and non-engaged students. Students expressed that there were empowering beliefs that promote some to become

leaders. These empowering beliefs encompassed three main areas: support from others, available opportunities, and one's background and environment (Shertzer & Schuh, 2004). Receiving support and encouragement from others, whether that be from fellow students or university faculty, was an important theme. A student in the research study who was not active in any leadership observed that some students are "almost expected to become the leaders" (Shertzer & Schuh, 2004, p. 123). This student believes that these certain people thus are given the support needed to establish confidence and become a leader.

In opposition to the empowering beliefs found among leaders, constraining beliefs held among disengaged students have been identified. The predominant themes among the constraining beliefs were: lack of capabilities, lack of confidence, and lack of opportunities (Shertzer & Schuh, 2004). Students may choose to not enter into leadership roles because they believe they do not have the ability to be a leader. Comparing themselves to student leaders, some students may believe "they don't have the skills to do that... much less the desire" (Shertzer & Schuh, 2004, p.125). The second constraining belief is a lack of confidence, which coincides with the lack of capability. A lack of confidence in one's abilities and self may be a significant contribution to certain students' lack of involvement and the "perspective that confidence is necessary to be a leader can help to perpetuate this constraining belief" (Shertzer & Schuh, 2004,, p.125). Their own perceived lack of confidence may inhibit them attempting to lead.

The third constraining belief, a lack of opportunity, is of particular interest. The research with the students exemplified that student leaders have found many

opportunities for leadership where the disengaged students do not. One student stated that he believes leaders “don’t give other individuals the chance, because they’re scared that they might do something better than them” (Shertzer & Schuh, 2004, p.126). Other disengaged students wished that there had been more opportunities and support. They expressed that this may have caused them to enter into leadership.

Many of my experiences within leadership seem to coincide with this research on the empowering and constraining beliefs regarding leadership. As I have invested in other students, I have often heard concerns over their own lack of capability and lack of confidence. Whether the lack of capability is regarding their time capacity, skills, motivation, or self-confidence, many students are immobilized by their own perceptions of their abilities. The heavy emphasis our culture places on confidence may be a disservice to the development of leaders. In my own life, my lack of self-confidence is a trait I have continually had to overcome in order to keep from being crippled by it. Despite this, my lack of confidence has likely allowed me to connect and understand others more easily while also promoting my humility.

I believe that student organizations may benefit if the deep-seated connection between leadership and confidence was erased. Instead of conforming to expectations of self-confidence and success, leaders should consider being more open about their thought processes, experiences of failure, and emotions. This may promote increased involvement and leadership among members by dismantling some of the false perceptions of unattainability surrounding leadership. Recently, I was uncomfortably vulnerable and honest about the concerning state of affairs within SAO and my own incompetence to handle it all. Immediately following this somewhat desperate plea for

unity and action, members stepped up in incredible ways that they never had previously. The events that were frighteningly close to falling apart, were hugely successful.

The constraining belief of a lack of opportunities provided insight into some of my experiences and thoughts. In the story I mentioned above, I was confused by the words of an executive board member who had wanted opportunities to lead. Despite being a member of the executive board, she seemed to hold this constraining belief. Where I had seen countless opportunities to serve and lead, she had not. In response to the lack of initiative and seeming absence of motivation, the vice president and I felt that we had no other option but to carry the bulk of responsibilities. Shertzer and Schuch (2004) identified that “the student leaders generally will emerge without needing to be pushed and can be trusted to serve in their roles without much supervision” (p. 127). Contrary to this, those who do not naturally emerge as leaders may require additional attention and “pushing” in order to have the leadership they desire. When students with strong constraining beliefs are in leadership positions, they do not consistently show initiative and trustworthiness. If I perceive opportunities where others do not, this type of misunderstanding will understandably occur. This type of scenario has happened in various ways throughout these years of leadership. Even as I have worked to be clear and vocal about the needs and opportunities for involvement, leadership, and originality, these differing beliefs cause some members to flourish while others remain stagnant.

Junior Year

Mental Illness

An odd series of events occurred within the first semester that I was vice president of SAO. I was a Junior now and the previous president and vice president, who had founded and carried the organization, were gone. At this point, the executive board consisted of seven people. A few weeks into the semester, one of the exec members was hit by a car while jogging and suffered various significant injuries. She was not able to be involved with SAO for the rest of the semester. Only a couple of weeks after this accident, the newly elected president of SAO, Dexter (names of personal acquaintances have been changed), fell approximately 60 feet while rock-climbing in West Virginia. I received this news and knew that he was being airlifted to a hospital, but my friends and I did not know if he would survive. A few hours later, I received a call from a friend who was on the climbing trip. He said, "Hey Steph. Dexter's not going to be at the SAO meeting on Tuesday." My response was, "I figured! Is he alive?" In light of the seriousness of this potentially fatal accident, his injuries were amazingly minor yet significant enough to keep him out of school for many weeks.

Around the same time as these two consecutive accidents, there were other difficult dynamics occurring within the executive board members' lives. Another member of the executive board was in the midst of a highly difficult and draining situation. Her mental and emotional health was faltering, which understandably affected her involvement in SAO. Two of the other members on the executive board were not

showing much involvement or commitment. I was stranded and seemed to be the sole leader of this organization. On top of the mounting stress from SAO, I was experiencing other difficult situations along with taking 20 credit hours, leading a Bible study, and working. Though my lack of competence was blatantly obvious to me, I was playing the roles of both president and vice president with a dysfunctional exec board in tow. I was barely functioning yet I was painfully aware that the success or failure of SAO was dependent on me.

Even prior to the accidents, I felt an extreme burden with the leadership of SAO my junior year. Before the accident, Dexter was struggling significantly with depression. I was one of the only people who knew the extent of his depression and, because of working closely together in leadership, I was greatly affected by his mental health. On multiple occasions, I would receive a text from him, hours before a group meeting, apologetically telling me that he could not be there. I was then forced to create a worthwhile and engaging agenda for the meeting in very little time. More than once, I received this news from him while in classes. I then felt panicked as I could no longer pay attention in class and instead went about the necessary planning to have the group meeting prepared. Around this time, I wrote in a journal, "This life is so hard... I want to give up... People in SAO are not following through with their responsibilities. Dexter is an absent president. I am tired. So tired. Inadequate."

The burden of trying to carry the organization seemed nearly unbearable at this time, yet the weight of this burden managed to increase drastically after the accidents occurred. I often felt envious of the two leaders who were no longer involved because of their injuries. I knew that I would never give myself a respite of my own volition - it

must be forced upon me with no alternative option. Thus in my exhaustion, I dreamed of something serious enough occurring to remove me from all of my roles. In early October, I wrote "I'm told, 'You're doing too much.' And I agree. That 'I'm worried about you.' And I say I'm worried about myself too. That "You can't keep doing everything you are." And I know I can't. But I know my stupid self. And I will continue doing it all. And this fluttering anxious ache will likely increase in my chest. Making it difficult and panicky to take deep breaths."

As a college student, I am within a demographic that has an increased propensity for developing depression and anxiety. Additionally, I experience the pressures of being both a leader and an activist. Feelings of isolation, "despair or personal fragility," can become common for people working in activist fields (Brown & Pickerill, 2009, p. 31). Researchers have recognized that these emotions may easily result in depression. Because of my activism work and awareness of injustice, I see a plethora of situations that cause me to feel hopeless and discouraged.

As a student leader, I am perpetually faced with what I have not achieved and my own ineffectiveness within the organization and the campus. There is a commonality among student leaders of living busy and action-focused lives. Their lives were distinguished as "exceedingly busy with meetings, activities, events, and other responsibilities of school, work, and family" (Logue, Hutchens, Hector, 2005, p. 402). Another recurring negative aspect of student leadership is the pressure experienced by leaders (Logue, et al., 2005). The stressors of leadership, in addition to the typical stress of academics, work, and relationships, have been powerful and prevalent in my college experience. As my leadership in campus activist work has

progressed, my symptoms of depression and anxiety have continued. My mental health may have been more profoundly impacted due to not merely being a leader, but being a leader in the field of activism.

Brown and Pickerill mention that despite the prevalence of depression, “activists are also adept at holding onto hope” (2009, p. 31). The prevalence of depression does not extinguish the activist’s ability to have hope. In leadership and activism, there is a need and expectation to foster hope and inspire others. I have felt the tension of being genuine about my state of burn-out and depression while still striving to lead with competence and passion. When faced by this seeming juxtaposition, I have experienced that “hope and despair can coexist” (Brown & Pickerell, 2009, p.31). Leadership has caused me to learn how to empower and impassion others despite phases of emotional emptiness and diminished passion. Even in the times when I have felt most incapable and discouraged, I have been surprised by the capacity for hope and passion that remains.

Typically, I have viewed my propensity for depressive feelings as a detriment to my leadership and activist endeavors. The mild depression I have experienced during my college career has made my leadership more difficult in various ways. I have assumed that this aspect of my mental state has interfered with my competence; but despite this weakness, I can succeed as a leader. Research has led me to contemplate that possibly this “despite” ought to be replaced with a “because” – because of this weakness, I can succeed as a leader. Author Nassir Ghaemi takes an existential stance by assessing the strengths of leaders with mental illness and states, “In times of crisis, mentally ill leaders can see what others don’t” (2011, p.1). While those who are

mentally healthy may be competent in times of ease and success, those with mental illness have historically thrived as leaders when faced with difficulty. Various leaders who are world-renowned for their positive leadership – such as Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi – struggled with depression throughout their lives (Ghaemi, 2011). It seems that depression can provide leaders with clarity, innovation, and perseverance.

Positive illusion is a term used to describe the tendency for non-depressed people to have an over-inflated concept of their ability to control their environment. In a research study on leadership among college students, students' sense of self-efficacy – "individuals' judgment of their capacity to perform specific tasks or processes" – was evaluated. "When individuals do err in their assessment of efficacy it is typically in the direction of over inflation in comparison with actual abilities" (Dugan & Komives, 2010, p. 541). This high self-regard is not found in people with depression, who tend to perceive the world more realistically (Ghaemi, 2011). Research studies have displayed that non-depressed people wrongly believe they are controlling situations whereas participants with depression recognize their actions are not affecting the outcome. Along with this increased realism, people with depression have higher rates of empathy and more concern for the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of others (Ghaemi, 2011). This combination of traits promotes increased potential for ingenuity and effective leadership.

In my own life, I clearly recognize that I do not over-inflate my efficacy but, if anything, may err on the opposite side. The traits of depression are also evident in my heightened sense of empathy, which at times can be overwhelming and debilitating. If I

were a non-depressed person, I may not have had the capacity and vision to continue leading SAO amidst tumultuous and discouraging phases. The realism with which I view situations within the organization has sometimes been written off as unnecessary pessimism or cynicism by other members. However, my seemingly negative view places me at an advantage in leadership as I am prepared for difficulty and disappointment.

Paradigms of Leadership

In my junior year, we brought in a speaker who was a sex trafficking victim, an alumnus of the university, and a best-selling author and activist. Her presentation was remarkable but the number of attendees was mediocre at best. While she spoke, I was equally as enthralled with her speech as I was infuriated that more students were not hearing this. I am often railed with disappointment by the attendance at events, particularly for events that are especially significant, such as this one. All of the publicity, expenses, and effort to hold an excellent event that garners a disappointing audience is a recurrence in my leadership life that I have learned to expect. Although, I logically know to expect this, the frustration does not decrease when it occurs. Yet even when we have a great turn-out at events, there is often an inkling thought in my mind of “was this worth it?”

As a leader of a social justice organization, I am perpetually attempting to convince people to care. The organization will never succeed – and, in a much grander scheme, the world will not experience positive change – if people do not care enough to take action. Yet convincing people, specifically students, to care is a task I cannot

seem to master. At times, I have wanted to scream out, “I just told you there are currently 35 million people in modern-day slavery! How can you not care? Do you have no empathy or concern for humanity?” In a way, I silently accuse and judge these people. Yet, I can also reason with myself to recognize that I am unfairly projecting my own passions onto others.

I have been made acutely aware of how non-committal college students can be. I am perpetually attempting to earn the commitment of even the members of SAO. Whether it is in attendance at meetings, coming to events, or participating in provided volunteer opportunities, I frequently see extreme inconsistencies. I often have asked, “How can I expect the support of others when I cannot even depend on the support of our members?” This type of experience has happened numerous times and to extreme degrees, leaving me irritated and confused. In attempting to establish consistency and involvement from members, I work to offer opportunities of interest and growth. I vocalize our desire for SAO to be an outlet for members to develop their talents and implement their ideas. In direct opposition to my perfectionist tendencies, I have purposed to refrain from micro-managing or displaying authoritarian manners. I view the hierarchy of organizations and executive boards as a necessary evil and greatly desire to see organic growth and leadership among members.

Leadership is often viewed from the industrial paradigm which contains various traditional perspectives of leadership. A core belief within the industrial paradigm is that “leadership is the property of an individual, meaning that one person provides leadership for a group” and is synonymous with management (Shertzer & Schuch, 2004, p. 114). Pervasive assumptions that stem from this paradigm are that leadership

is inherent and not developed, there is one expected and accepted way to lead, and that leadership is dependent on having a position or title. These assumptions are considered to be “myths,” yet remain prevalent in society, including college campuses. This fosters increased expectations on individuals who are formally recognized as leaders. The paradigm also enforces the concept that those without official titles are incapable of acting as leaders, due to lacking either innate abilities or a title that implies the recognition of others (Shertzer & Schuch, 2004).

Due to recent development in leadership and criticism of the industrial paradigm, the postindustrial paradigm has been established. The perceptions within the postindustrial leadership display many contradictions to the industrial paradigm. Some of the assumptions developed from this paradigm are as follows: “leadership is based on relationships and does not belong to any individual; leadership is meant to create change; and leadership can be done by anyone, not just by people who are designated leaders” (Shertzer & Schuch, 2004, p. 114). Researchers have found that despite the lingering prevalence of the industrial paradigm, the postindustrial paradigm can also be found. Nontraditional perspectives associated with the postindustrial paradigm are more common among women student leaders, which is evident through the language they used in defining their leadership, such as, “nonhierarchical, interactive, accessible, one-to-one, equality, and team member” (Shertzer & Schuh, 2004, p.114). Women leaders also manifest the postindustrial paradigm through their tendency of emphasizing collectivity and collaboration (Shertzer & Schuch, 2004).

Unfortunately, I can perceive how aspects of the industrial paradigm have been pervasive within the collective perspectives among SAO. The brunt of the responsibility

for nearly every aspect of SAO has fallen on the president and vice president. Heads automatically turn to me, as the president, in both trivial and important matters. When responsibilities and roles are delegated to others, I express that they have my support with my willingness to provide further assistance, the freedom to make decisions, and the liberty to take their role or responsibility where they deem best. Despite this, the majority of the time, those in these roles instinctually desire my affirmation, advice, and decision-making for the details of their responsibilities. I do not consider this a fully negative recurrence, or a fault of those catering to the hierarchy, but an interesting tendency. Frequently, I have received the advice from people wanting me to decrease my stress levels, “delegate more!” To this suggestion, I want to respond, “Yeah right. Delegating is a joke!” I do not question the value and essentialness of delegating but I no longer expect it to decrease my own stress or responsibilities.

Senior Year

Involvement in Social Justice

At the very beginning of every new school year, there is an activity fair on campus. Hundreds of campus organizations set up tables on a gymnasium floor where thousands of students file through, perusing all of the options available to them. A subtle competitive air is evident as every organization is hoping to catch new students who will become their committed future leaders - at least I know this is my goal. But, I also know I am not likely to achieve this goal in an environment where most students attend the activity fair for the sole purpose of being given free stuff. Still, I have been there representing SAO for the past two years, giving my best effort despite knowing the

futility. I talk with everyone I can and, because of this, my throat has been raspy and sore by the end of the two hours. Typically, I expect little to no tangible results from the effort even with those who express a significant amount of interest.

Now and then at the activity fair, I will meet someone whom I actually believe may be legitimate in their interest and desire to get involved. This past year, I met a freshman who caused me to be very hopeful. He was interested in the cause, asked questions, and expressed excitement to become a member. I spent a long time talking with him and learned about his interests and passions. His personality and goals seemed to be exactly what is desired in a leader. I happened to see him on campus and we remembered each other's names. He told me that SAO's call-out meeting was in his planner and that he was looking forward to being there. Obviously, I was excited about the potential within this student. Particularly in light of the disproportionately high amount of females involved in SAO, a male freshman with his personality was all the more wanted. But this freshman did not show up to the call-out meeting or any subsequent meetings or events. We talk to one another on the rare occasions that we cross paths, but my sole activity fair prodigy proved to be a false hope.

My generation of peers – the millennials – has a reputation for a variety of characteristics. Some of these are an obsession with selfies, disillusionment with the American Dream, and a desire for social justice. This propensity for social justice is evident by the apparent interest in activism I see on campus. The actual application of this interest in activism is questionable, however, causing millennials to sometimes be derogatorily coined “slackavists.” The disparity between students' expression of interest in social justice and their engagement is evident to me as an activist organization

leader. A variety of factors may cause students to remain uninvolved or noncommittal in their involvement.

The process of becoming engaged in social justice has been delineated into several steps that begin with seeing the reality of oppression, understanding one's own role, and engaging in advocacy (Miller, 2009). Individuals' sense of self-efficacy regarding social justice highly influences their engagement. This relates to an individual's set of beliefs regarding their perceived ability to be effective. Social justice efficacy influences whether an individual chooses to be involved in advocacy, the effort one puts forth, and the individual's persistence despite difficulties. Social justice outcome expectations, "the perceived positive outcomes associated with social justice engagement," play a role in determining people's involvement (Miller, 2009, p.497). Understandably, when individuals believe they have the capacity to make a difference and see positive future results from their involvement, they are likely to be interested and engaged. Along with self-efficacy and outcome expectation, an individual who has higher levels of social support is more likely to commit to social justice endeavors (Miller, 2009).

Expectations Surrounding Activism

Despite feeling frustrated with others' lack of commitment, ultimately I always direct this frustration back at myself. Especially throughout my senior year, as the president of SAO, I have felt the pressure from having to be the final decision-maker and the one who is expected to find solutions to dilemmas. When something goes well, I give the credit to others involved but when something does not go well, I take the

blame. Because of my perfectionist tendencies, I am continually seeing aspects of the organization that should have been executed differently. When I see a problem, such as lack of commitment from members, I think, "I must be doing something wrong." At successful events, my mind still notices all the specifics that could have been better. In my mind, all of the faults, failings, and weaknesses within the organization reflect back on my own competence, or lack thereof.

Along with projecting onto myself the inadequacies within SAO, I also feel an external pressure due to the nature of the organization. Because of being a leader in an activist field, I am held to a certain standard of knowledge and commitment. Countless times, I have been interviewed by other students. Friends, acquaintances, and mainly strangers have interviewed me about human trafficking and other relevant topics. These have been used for research papers, speeches, the university newspaper, magazine stories, student-produced television, and other projects. In these interviews, I am expected to be a competent source of facts, inspiration, knowledge, and experience for a range of topics. Sometimes, I want to advise people to simply find the answer themselves instead of asking me. I feel a pressure to fulfill the expectations of being highly knowledgeable or risk giving outdated or incorrect information. Along with this expectation, I desire to be relatable, passionate, kind, and to generally represent SAO well.

As someone who is easily recognized as an activist, I am not only expected to be knowledgeable and an ever-available source for interviews, but also am supposed to support every "good" cause. Understandably, it is automatically assumed that I will care about whatever human rights-related issue is at hand. Once I had a stranger contact

me, from the suggestion of others who knew I am a feminist, in the hope that I would begin a new student organization with her. I feel a pressure to attend and promote events that are vaguely akin to the mission of SAO. Because of the nature of SAO, I also scrutinize my consumer habits as I am aware of the unethical treatment behind many products. Because of others looking to me as a leader, I feel an increased expectation to refrain from purchasing non-fair trade chocolate, coffee, and other products that are rooted in exploitation. Often, I have felt that I cannot express feelings of burn-out or apathy and am expected by others to be the “advocate” even in situations wholly unrelated to SAO. Generally, I have felt a plethora of expectations and standards surrounding my visible leadership in an activist organization.

The expectations surrounding activists have been identified by researchers. The standards and image that the concept of “activist” evokes, causes people involved in activist-type work to consider themselves undeserving of the label “activist.” People expect activists to display an unwavering self-sacrifice, perseverance, and devotion for the purpose of social change. “They must ‘live’ and materially embody their commitment to their chosen cause” (Brown & Pickerill, 2009, p. 27). Authors Brown and Pickerill acknowledged that they have received accusations of not exemplifying adequate commitment and sacrifice to claim the identity of activist. This standard is unrealistic, harmful, romanticized, and inhibits the expression of certain emotions (Brown & Pickerill, 2009).

This unrealistic expectation of what activists are and do is identifiable in my own experiences. Because my leadership role places me in this role, I have felt the pressure to perpetually maintain high levels of passion, commitment, knowledge, and self-

sacrifice. Interestingly, as I researched expectations around activism, I realized how deeply I have bought into this myth and perfect standard of activism. As I read the Brown & Pickerill article, I jotted down bits of my thoughts: “realizing as reading this that maybe I actually am an activist. I have been perpetually discounting my experiences as not “true” activism... placing my work at an inferior place... buying into the myth/image of what real activists are/do.” As I have been writing this autoethnography, I felt uncomfortable and wrong using the word “activism” or “activist” in reference to myself. As I researched and found information pertaining to activists’ experiences, I felt that it was relevant only to a certain degree because I do not qualify as an activist. Through reading about this unhealthy perspective of activists, I experienced a minor self-confrontation in evaluating my propensity to disregard my role by viewing myself as “unworthy” of the activist title. At the conclusion of my leadership in SAO, the scribbled thought of “maybe I actually am an activist” is new and potentially even empowering.

Leadership Traits

At various times, I have thought of the well-known quote “Some were born great. Some achieve greatness. Some have greatness thrust upon them” in regards to leadership. I think that possibly, “Some were born leaders. Some achieve leadership. Some have leadership thrust upon them.” Frequently, I have thought that leadership has been thrust upon me. Because of my hyper-awareness of my own inadequacies and my frequent frustration with leadership, I do not believe that I am a natural born leader. Also, I do not think that I have achieved leadership through some

effort of mine. However, in various aspects of my life, leadership has been continually thrust upon me.

Throughout my life, I have been in informal and formal positions of leadership without understanding why. For example, as a sixteen year old, after three weeks in a new job I was asked to undergo the training to become a “team leader.” I was a new employee, with many fellow workers who were much older than I was and had worked there for much longer. When I was five, I was in my first dance performance where I was the first “bunny” on stage. I had the responsibility of motioning for all the other bunnies to follow me and I distinctly remember sitting backstage sobbing from horrific stage fright. I was fully aware that if I could not manage to make my terror subside, there would be no one else prepared to lead all the other bunnies. (Thankfully, I managed to pull through in the heat of the moment!) In middle school, I remember being severely bothered when someone mentioned that I was “the leader of my friend group.” I adamantly denied this despite recognizing the truth of it. When I was eleven, my dance teacher congenially labelled me “the instigator,” although my friends and I had no idea what this meant at the time. In high school, I remember being dumbfounded when another student casually mentioned that if I am excited or passionate about something, others will inevitably be as well.

These situations of un-sought after leadership have followed me throughout my life, yet I never fully recognized or processed them. These occurrences seemed to continue and accelerate upon coming to college. During my sophomore year, it was evident that the current president and vice president were preparing and expecting me to step into leadership. I had many uncertainties but decided to run for the position of

vice president. At the meeting when nominations occurred, I was the only one nominated. I was told that at least one other person planned to run for the position but quickly decided against it once I was nominated.

One year later, I had to decide what I wanted my involvement to look like for my next, and final, school year. Under the strong assumption that I would be president, some members seemed appalled that I was even considering my options. I remember being informed, "You have to be president! What will happen if you're not?!" The internal struggle over this decision was significant and drawn-out. I sought advice from many different people, which only provided me with conflicting insights and opinions. I scribbled down a pros and cons list that had more points under the cons than the pros. Some of these cons were 1) anxiety and stress, 2) burn-out, 3) additional responsibilities of my senior year (honors thesis, grad school or job applications, wedding-planning, living off-campus), and 4) that SAO might benefit more from new leadership. Some of the pros I listed were 1) my passion, 2) the potential for a better executive board, 3) avoiding the awkwardness and difficulty of navigating how to just be a member, and 4) the opportunity to invest more in future leaders. The last pro listed was "affirmation of my existence," which seems to be an overdramatic indication of my desire to and dependency on spending myself in a tangible way for a worthy cause.

I came to the realization that I did not have the ability to opt out of leadership; this organization seemed to be ingrained into me. To a degree, I would have felt that I was betraying myself and the SAO members if I stepped down. I decided to run for president, with the almost hopeful awareness that potentially someone else could be elected. Each position had multiple students nominated for it, except the position of

president. Exactly as had happened the prior year, I was the sole nominee. Yet again, leadership was thrust upon me. No one was surprised and I heard, "Why would we nominate anyone else?" Their confidence in me was endearing but – in my opinion – ill-founded, and it only reinforced the pressure and expectations I felt weighing on me.

The *trait theory* of leadership has been a predominant theme within the understanding of leadership, based in the notion that "leadership depended on the personal qualities of the leader" (Judge, Ilies, Bono, Gerhardt, 2002, p. 765). However, this theory is no longer considered to be the main or strongest approach. Stodgill was one of the first researchers to challenge the validity of trait theory. Through his research on leadership he stated, "The findings suggest that leadership is not a matter of passive status or of the mere possession of some combination of traits" (Judge, et al., 2002, p. 765). My anecdotal thought that I am not someone who was born a leader is supported by research. This perspective is considered to be too simplistic as research indicates that there are not universal leadership traits that can be innately possessed.

Although the concept that leadership ability is solely dependent on certain traits is deemed inaccurate, various research studies have sought to determine the shared personality characteristics among leaders. Through a meta-analysis of research on traits and leadership, Judge, et al. evaluated recurring traits and themes (2002). The connection between personality traits and leadership was also assessed through the five-factor model of personality or the Big Five Traits. These five traits are considered to be the most prominent aspects of personality: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Judge, et al., 2002, p.767).

In the vast majority of reviews included in the meta-analysis, self-confidence was identified as a trait predictive of leadership (Judge, et al., 2002). Self-confidence and self-esteem are both connected to low neuroticism, which is an indication of leadership. Individuals with high levels of neuroticism are less likely to be effective leaders or to be viewed as leaders by others. Although not as prevalent as self-confidence, extraversion is another personality trait associated with leadership. In qualitative studies, adjectives used to describe leaders are often synonymous with the descriptions of extraverted people. Two of the main components of extraversion are dominance and sociability, along with being active, energetic, and assertive (Judge, et al., 2002). The Big Five Traits of openness and conscientiousness also seem to be positively associated with leadership. Openness is defined by originality, “divergent thinking,” and creativity - abilities that are beneficial in leadership. Conscientiousness is defined by achievement and dependability and can be manifested through the competence and perseverance of leaders (Judge, et al., 2002).

When studying and measuring leadership, it can be separated into two aspects: leadership emergence and leadership effectiveness. *Leadership emergence* is the extent to which an individual is viewed as a leader by others. Research on this topic aims to determine what factors cause people to be perceived as a leader (Judge, et al., 2002). The term *leadership effectiveness* “refers to a leader’s performance in influencing and guiding the activities of his or her unit toward achievement of its goals” (Judge, et al., 2002, p.767). In sum, leadership emergence focuses on perceptions and formation as a leader while leadership effectiveness assesses competence as a leader.

As previously mentioned, I have been identified as a leader in various circumstances throughout my life. Frequently, I have been unaware that others in groups and social circles perceive me as a leader. Others may be observing me exemplify traits associated with leadership emergence that I do not recognize in myself. Two of the traits strongly associated with leadership emergence were self-confidence and extraversion. These are personality traits that do not come naturally to me. I do not describe myself as self-confident or extraverted but others do. Often, people in my life are surprised and even incredulous when they find out that I have low self-confidence and am more introverted than extroverted. I tend to behave in ways that are more extraverted and self-confident than I feel. Potentially, I am more self-confident than I perceive myself to be. My perfectionist tendencies and overly self-critical mindset has caused me to believe that I have little self-confidence. From a more objective standpoint, I can acknowledge a slow growth of self-confidence over the years. Thus, others' perceptions of me exuding self-confidence may be more accurate than my own analysis and view of myself. My own view of myself, which is likely inaccurate and negative, causes me to be confused by repeatedly being one whom others choose to follow. This incongruity between my self-perceptions and others' perceptions of me is why I feel that leadership has been "thrust upon me."

Effectiveness

The former vice president of SAO, Lily (names of personal acquaintances have been changed), has been a friend, mentor, and role model to me since my freshman year. She moved to Asia to work as a missionary for a minimum of four years after graduating. At the beginning of my second semester as vice president of SAO, she

sent me this message. "...As for motivation for the semester, I want you to know that what you do with SAO and living life in America daily is important and I realize that even more now than before. I was at a coffee shop last week and two white guys were sitting there talking about what you could get, for how much, where, and making comparisons to the US [in regards to purchasing women for sex]. The point is I got really angry and had to leave so I didn't do something crazy...but it got me thinking...if people didn't come here for it, my job would be a whole lot easier haha, but more importantly it just wouldn't be a problem. Ya know?" I responded to her, "I needed to hear that. Sometimes it is very easy to think that this is pointless. So thanks for the motivation." To this, Lily replied, "Seriously, I remember feeling that way and now I feel the opposite. Once they get here in many ways it's too late for words...but if they are aware and their hearts are changed there then they won't come here...at least not for that."

This story that she shared with me supports the mindset I have tried to foster. I believe that changing one person's perspective will be worth it and that this influence can multiply in unforeseeable ways. I recognize that the experiences and lessons we learn in college can set the trajectory for the rest of our lives and shape who we become. As a leader of an activist organization, I have a unique opportunity to influence people at a formative time of their lives. I cannot know the ripple effect that may stem from SAO's presence at this university. If I look solely to money raised or number of attendees, I am getting an inaccurate view of our effectiveness. The important goals are less tangible than these numbers and I may never know about the most significant outcomes of my work.

Although I can logically recognize the hypothetical influence of this work, I often am plagued by the thought “This is not worth it.” All of the hours, meetings, worries, text messages, interviews, requests, disappointments, presentations, sleep-deprivation, phone calls, and frustrations. There is an abundance of fodder for feeling like a failure that being a leader readily provides for me. Sometimes I begin to imagine what my college career would have been like had I never become involved in SAO – how vastly different my experiences may have been. There is a plethora of stress and situations that would not have been my concern. Amidst all of this, there is still the persisting doubt that this is worth it. Is all of the time and stress worth it for a one-time event? Are any of these people actually being instigated to change or care? Is this nothing more than an outlet for students to feel that they are cool young activists? Is there any real conviction or commitment? When we raise funds to support the work of SAO globally, the money we make seems pathetically insignificant in light of what is needed. We purpose to educate people, but I rarely see that people are learning. We want their education to turn into everyday action but this can seem like nothing more than a sappy statement. As I attempt to lead with passion and skill, I am left wondering if any of this is effective.

At one of SAO's final meetings, we asked our members to briefly provide written feedback to a few questions. These responses were given anonymously and addressed simple questions regarding what they perceive to be SAO's strengths and weaknesses, and ideas for the future. The responses provided a degree of affirmation that leading this organization and investing in these members had not been

ineffective. The following are some of the responses written by the members. Some of the areas that were described as SAO's strengths were as follows:

- PASSION. Encouraging. I felt somewhat small in a "big" world and campus, but SAO made/makes me feel important.
- Great leadership. I hope next year and beyond will be just as strong.
- All of the people in SAO were friendly and helped foster an inviting environment.
- The passion SAO has to make a positive change on campus/in the world
- What this group is all about is the epitome of my deepest passions, and with the direction this group is going in, I'd love to be there every step of the way.
- The community and openness—people were open about discouragement and stress
- A genuine desire among members to learn more and help others learn more.
- Strong leadership
- I have been involved with many organizations at college, and SAO has been my favorite. There is such a heart and genuine passion here

Many members also provided feedback on what they have learned through their involvement. The majority of the responses had similar themes that are represented here:

- That it [human trafficking] is much more prevalent than I previously thought and comes in many more forms than I thought... I can share this with others now. I'm educated. And that's a mission of SAO. So important.

- A lot of sexual objectification, which has made me more aware of how I objectify people sometimes.
- Before this club, I had no idea that this happened and that there are more slaves now than ever before... The more I learn, the more I want to fight to change the way things are.
- I've learned so much more about slavery and human trafficking and how it affects girls as young as 11 or 12. It blew my mind that it's happening all over America.
- I can help change the course of the future. My voice and my actions matter. If I don't stand up for these people, who will? My actions and priorities reflect what I find most important. So if I really care about human trafficking, I need to take a stand! I have learned so much and grown as a person because of my

involvement in SAO. As previously mentioned, Lily was a significant impact for the first two years of my college career. Along with other influences, she helped me develop passion, skills, and a strongly rooted commitment. Because of Lily investing in me, I all the more desired to carry on and improve the work she began with SAO. At the end of my sophomore year, when I was elected to succeed her as vice president, I hoped to be to others a semblance of what she had been to me. I prayed for a freshman to come to this college who would be what I had been in my relationship with Lily - someone who becomes committed to this cause, who I could invest in, befriend, and ultimately "pass the torch" to. Not long into my first semester as vice president, I became confidently aware that a freshman named Joel (names of personal acquaintances have been changed) was this person. His actions, growth, and leadership are a significant

reminder that, through SAO, the everyday actions of individual can be changed. Joel has become one of my close friends and is more like a younger sibling to me than anyone else. He also was recently elected to be the upcoming vice president of SAO.

In my junior year, Joel told me how a scene from Lord of the Rings reminds him of SAO. In this scene, Frodo says to Gandalf "I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened." Gandalf, in all his wizardly wisdom responds, "So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us." With tears in his eyes, Joel explained that, in a way, he wishes he had never become involved in SAO and learned about the reality of the suffering in the world. He misses his comfortable life when he was unaware of the existence of extreme exploitation, such as human trafficking. He also confidently told me that because of the knowledge he has now, he recognizes his responsibility to decide to rightly use the time he has been given. When I heard Joel say this, I knew that he had bought in to the cause and understood the cost of commitment. I felt like crying with him - tears of regret and gratitude - regret for the lives of relative ease and ignorance that our knowledge of the world cannot allow us to have and gratitude at the realization that he was becoming a future leader who would be invested throughout his college experience and the rest of his life.

One Monday in February, during my final semester of college, I happen to remember very well. I felt like I was falling apart, which is not a particularly rare experience. I worked for nine hours and had a short amount of time before I needed to lead a group SAO meeting. I arrived later than usual to prepare for the meeting

because I could not manage to stop crying at my apartment. I was overwhelmed with stress and discouragement from SAO and life in general. As I expect from myself, I did not let this show at the meeting but was an energetic, organized, and passionate leader.

At the meeting, I heard about a 16-year-old sex trafficking victim who had shared her story at a concert that SAO hosted the previous semester. In a conversation she recently had with one of our members, she spoke of how impactful the night at SAO's concert was for her. Being at the event caused her to realize that she is no longer a victim and it is her time to fight for those who still are victims. This was powerful for us to hear as we expected people at the event to be influenced by her, but not for her to be profoundly affected by us.

After the meeting, a student named Sarah (names of personal acquaintances have been changed) asked me if I remembered where I found a message that I had read at group meeting about a year ago. She had found it to be inspirational and wanted to re-read it but I was not confident in my memory. I mentioned that it may have been a blog post from the same man who spoke at the Speaker Event I had planned my sophomore year. I asked her if she had attended and she said, "No, I don't think so." I commented on how terrible and consuming that event was for me and some of the lofty goals I had for it. Something I said about the specifics of the event, potentially the bracelets, caused her to burst out, "Wait! I was at that. That event changed my life!" In shock, I clarified that we were talking about the same event. She insisted, "Yes, yes! That changed my life and my whole family's life." My eyes filled with tears as she elaborated, "I don't even remember that much about the event or how I ended up there

– I just randomly went for some reason. But I remember sitting there and knowing my life would never be the same again... I still talk about that event when people ask me how I became passionate about social justice and fighting human trafficking.”

Sarah’s passion has led her to host two annual awareness events in her hometown that will continue to happen in future years. With the help of her family, she has dedicated significant effort to producing these events that have successfully fostered community involvement, education, and fund-raising. I attended the second event that she held and observed the positive impact and unity it provided. Knowing the origination of this family’s passion and work was encouraging and motivating for me. After Sarah first told me about her life-changing experience at SAO’s Speaker Event event I wrote in my journal,

This is one of the most significant things ever said to me. That two whole years and so many events and SO MUCH burn-out, I would hear this. All the months, frustrations, tears, hundreds of bracelets, probably hundreds of hours, burnt fingertips, politics with other organizations, all of it – all of it seemed like a waste. I was embarrassed by how ineffective it seemed. Wouldn’t acknowledge it. I had prayed that it would change the life of one person. And it did. And I will never know how many people will be affected by the work Sarah does.

Because of her noteworthy competence, passion, experience, and dedication, Sarah was recently elected to be president of SAO next year. Sarah, whose life was changed by the event that I considered a waste of all my seemingly endless effort, will be the president. She will be serving alongside the newly elected vice president, Joel, whom I had prayed for months prior to even meeting and had invested in for two years. Seeing

this unfold at the conclusion of my leadership of SAO is overwhelmingly significant to me.

In the past, I have shared with members how I view the need that this generation faces. As I grew up, I often looked at historical occurrences of injustice and abuse and wondered, "What would I have done?" During the civil rights movement in the United States, the holocaust in Nazi Germany, the genocide in Rwanda, the trans-Atlantic slave trade – would I have remained silent? Or would I have fought for the rights of those being oppressed? I tend to believe that of course I would; of course I would never passively accept the existence of these horrendous human rights violations. I must then look at the world today – at the injustice, the suffering, the brokenness – and ask, "Will I fight for what is right or will I ignore this?" Just as I look at the past and think, "Of course I would have taken action," I must look at the present and future saying, "Of course I will take action." Often this action may seem mundane, difficult, and futile, but at least I am standing for what is important and just.

If, when I am in my old age, a grandchild asks, "Did you know there were apparently over 30 million people in slavery when you were my age? What did you do about it?" at least I will not have to respond, "Yes, I knew. But I didn't do anything... I guess I didn't really care" or "I felt like I couldn't make a difference." I have told members this and more, and have felt the inspiration sparking in their eyes. I ask them, "If we – we who are aware, educated, young, and free – will not choose to stand against injustice, then who will?" I have challenged them to commit themselves to this because they will not regret it. They may regret many choices throughout their college careers but choosing to commit and fight for a worthy cause will not be regretted. I can say this

with conviction but, as my college career comes to a close, will I believe it for myself? Will I not regret everything that my commitment to this cause has entailed? With a mere hint of uncertainty, I believe I can say I will not regret this. Being a leader has shaped me in powerful ways and played an influential role in shaping others. Throughout all the difficulty and seeming ineffectiveness, this work has been worthy.

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